Edmund Rice was born at Westcourt, the family tenant farm in Callan, County Kilkenny, Ireland, on 1 June 1762. He grew up in a relatively well-off Catholic family where he developed in faith and received a limited education before joining his uncle’s business in Waterford, providing supplies for ships and for the British Navy and Army. He was respected on all sides because of his fair dealings, particularly in paying the producers for their livestock of which he was a good judge.

Edmund was very successful in business and became very wealthy as did many of his social class. He married and it is understood that his wife was Mary Elliot. She died at about the time their daughter, also Mary, was born in 1789. The infant was raised by Edmund and his step-sister, Joan, who became his housekeeper. In his grief and the turmoil of these circumstances, his commitment to God developed to the stage where he considered entering religious life.

Edmund was becoming more aware of the desires of many of his acquaintances for an Ireland liberated from English rule and of the poverty of most people throughout the land. After much discernment and the recommendations of some who knew him, including the forthright Bishop of Waterford, Thomas Hussey, he “abandons the ambitions of his class”, sells his business and begins instructing boys of the poor living on the streets of Waterford. In 1802, the project begins in a stable in the town while a new school is built on the edge of the city closer to where many of the poor reside. He is determined that school will be conducted according to his improvements on the best standards of the day.

The free school, known as Mount Sion, opened in 1803. Edmund and his first couple of helpers were soon caring for two to three hundred students, providing food and clothing as well as an education that would help them in the work places of business and commerce and that would build their prayer life and knowledge of the Bible. Edmund was following the call of the Spirit into a religious life that would impact both Church and society. He and his helpers lived at Mount Sion and this was the beginning of the Christian Brothers.

The Congregation spread as other bishops sent men to join the work and begin schools in other towns. Edmund continued to be involved in Irish nationalism, helping new orders of sisters with finances and investments, Temperance, works of charity involving orphans and children of alcoholic parents as well as helping slaves to escape and hide. His life was more and more about Liberation which begins with ‘welcoming strangers’. He died in 1844. Pope John Paul II beatified Edmund Rice at a ceremony in St. Peter’s Square, Rome, on 6th October 1996. He became known as Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice. His official feast day is May 5.

For further information about the life of Edmund Rice and the history and work of the Christian Brothers, please visit: www.edmundrice.org.au